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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)

Education: National Endowment for the Arts and  
Humanities, Subject Files II (1962-1996)

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1989

# Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 04

Robert Garfias

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
IRVINE, CALIFORNIA 92717

June 26, 1989

89 JUL -5 PM 3:12

Honorable William Armstrong  
U.S. Senate  
SH-528 Hart Senate House Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Armstrong:

I appreciate very much the deep concern expressed in your letter to me on the photographic exhibit which included works by Andres Serrano. As a member of the National Council on the Arts, I felt compelled to respond in hopes of shedding some light on the views of at least one member of that body.

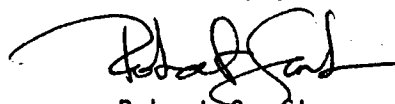
The Serrano case has already been the subject of some discussion in the Council. While there is no question that the work of this artist may be offensive to some viewers, or even to many, Serrano, himself says that the crucifix has been an important symbol in his life and his piece is an attempt to come to terms with that part of his life. Although I personally find it distasteful, I am convinced that this work was generated out of a personal religious conviction.

In my own view much of the evangelical broadcasting done on television in America borders on hucksterism and yet, although I find it unsavory, I would find it an intolerable suppression of religious freedom should such programing be censored. Short of illegal practices or those which are dangerous to human life where should the lines be drawn? If we begin to censor certain types of religious expression where do we stop?

I believe, however, that the Serrano case should be considered on the basis of art. What I said here about religious expression, I firmly believe also applies to art. Since the late 19th Century and through all of the 20th, the work of most creative artists, visual artists, composers, writers and choreographers--and most of the most renowned of these--was at first found offensive by many. As a reflection of the dynamic technological changes in the West during this period, the artist has taken up a role in which the new works break new ground, are deep and thoughtful personal expressions and very often, provocative. It is part of the artistic process of the West. The best censorship must remain our right to walk away from whatever we can not esteem. The health of art in the nation requires a diverse range of expressions which only freedom of expression can provide.

The National Endowment for the Arts was not intended to provide full basic support for the arts. As such its funding has always been well below that of most European nations and much below that of many of those of Asia, as well. With its relatively limited resources, the Endowment was, from the outset, placed in the role of being responsible for providing support in the form of leverage for private funds and of acting as a stimulus for keeping the arts alive and strong in the nation. Quite the contrary if the National Endowment for the Arts were to stop providing support for the small percentage of radically new expressions in art which it now does, it will have, in my view, ceased to serve the purpose for which it was originally intended. Were this ever to come about, then this would be truly a matter of great concern and danger to the nation.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robert Garfias', with a stylized, flowing script.

Robert Garfias

cc: Senator Claiborne Pell  
Senator Sidney Yates